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Critical Thinking and the Question of Critique: Some Lessons from Deconstruction

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Abstract. This article provides some philosophical "groundwork" for contemporary debates about the status of the idea(l) of critical thinking. The major part of the article consists of a discussion of three conceptions of "criticality," viz., critical dogmatism, transcendental critique (Karl-Otto Apel), and deconstruction (Jacques Derrida). It is shown that these conceptions not only differ in their answer to the question what it is "to be critical." They also provide different justifications for critique and hence different answers to the question what gives each of them the "right" to be critical. It is argued that while transcendental critique is able to solve some of the problems of the dogmatic approach to criticality, deconstruction provides the most coherent and self-reflexive conception of critique. A crucial characteristic of the deconstructive style of critique is that this style is not motivated by the truth of the criterion (as in critical dogmatism) or by a certain conception of rationality (as in transcendental critique), but rather by a concern for justice. It is suggested that this concern should be central to any redescription of the idea(l) of critical thinking.

Key words: education, critical thinking, critical theory, critical pedagogy, Apel, Derrida, deconstruction

> Deconstruction, if such a thing exists, should open up. (Derrida, 1987, p. 261)

Philosophy, Critique, and Modern Education

Ever since philosophy has lodged itself into Western thought, or to put it more self-consciously: ever since philosophy has inaugurated Western thought, it has understood itself as a critical enterprise. Socrates is undoubtedly the main icon of the critical style of philosophy. By a constant questioning of received opinions he tried to reveal that these could not be sustained as easily as was assumed. In his later dialogues Plato translated the Socratic approach into a distinction between knowledge (*episteme*) and belief (*doxa*). This was not only a formalization of the Socratic style. It also entailed a division of tasks – and thereby a distinction – between the common man, who could only achieve *doxa*, and the philosopher, who could have *episteme*, who could have knowledge of an ultimate reality beyond mere convention and decision.

Apart from a justification of the superior position of the philosopher in the *polis*, Plato's distinction also articulated a specific understanding of the *resources*

for critique. For Plato it was the very knowledge of ultimate reality, i.e., of the world of Ideas, which provided the philosopher with a *criterion* so that *krinein* – distinction, separation, decision, disputation, judgement – became possible. In a similar vein Aristotle stressed the indispensability of a criterion. "There must be certain canons," he wrote, "by reference to which a hearer shall be able to criticize" (Aristotle, *De Partibus Animalium*, I.1, 639a, 12).

While Western philosophy has traveled many different routes since Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, the critical temper has certainly not been lost. It seems more accurate to say that the critical motive has become a, if not *the* central concern for modern philosophy, especially since it had to renounce its claim to a higher form of knowledge about the natural world (meta-physics) as a result of the emergence of the natural sciences (see Rorty, 1980).

A crucial step in the development of the critical face of modern philosophy was the *generalization* of the idea of critique. Pierre Bayle – the other philosopher from Rotterdam – was among the first modern scholars who went beyond the idea that only texts could be the object of critique (see his *Dictionaire Historique et Critique* from 1715). From then on institutions like church and state, and society more generally, became possible targets for critical examination (see Röttgers, 1990). This culminated, a few decennia later, in Kant's rather bold claim that our age is the true age of critique, a critique to which everything must be subjected (see Röttgers, 1990, p. 892).

Kant's three *Critiques* still stand out as a major attempt to articulate what it could mean for philosophy to be critical. But Kant has not said the last word. His idea of critique as a tribunal of reason was challenged by Hegel and Marx from a perspective in which a much more historical orientation came to the fore (see Röttgers, 1990). Both orientations – reason and history – have continued to play a central role in the two main critical traditions of 20th century philosophy, viz., Popper's critical rationalism and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School.

From the Enlightenment onwards the question of critique has become intimately connected with the question of education. As Usher and Edwards (1994, p. 24) have argued, the very rationale of the modern understanding of education is founded "on the humanist idea of a certain kind of subject who has the inherent potential to become self-motivated and self-directing." Consequently the main task of education became that of bringing out this potential so that subjects could become "fully autonomous and capable of exercising their individual and intentional agency" (ibid., pp. 34–35; see also Mollenhauer, 1982, pp. 9–16).

It was, again, Kant who provided an explicit argument for linking critique and education. Kant not only defined Enlightenment as "man's release from his self-incurred tutelage through the exercise of his own understanding" (Kant, 1992, p. 90). He also argued that man's "propensity and vocation to free thinking" – which he considered to be man's "ultimate destination" and the "aim of his existence" (Kant, 1982, p. 701) – could only be brought about by means of education. Kant not only considered man to be the only creature that *has to be* educated.

He even argued that man could *only* become human *through education*. Man is therefore everything he is because of what education has made him to be.[1]

Critical Thinking and the Question of Critique

Over the past decades one of the most explicit manifestations of the critical vocation of education has been developed under the name of *critical thinking*. Robert Ennis's 1962-article "A concept of critical thinking" (Ennis, 1962) is often credited as the starting point for the present interest in critical thinking in the English speaking world (see, e.g., Siegel, 1988, p. 5; Thayer-Bacon, 1993, p. 236; Snik and Zevenbergen, 1995, p. 103). In his article Ennis defined critical thinking as "the correct assessing of statements" (Ennis, 1962, p. 83) and identified several aspects and dimensions of critical thinking. In later publications Ennis revised his definition to "reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (Ennis, 1987, p. 10), arguing that one must both have the skills necessary to be a critical thinker *and* the inclination to use these skills.

Ennis's work has not only been an important factor in the resurgence of interest in critical thinking as an educational ideal. It has also provided an important point of reference for subsequent debates concerning critical thinking and education. Besides Ennis, key participants in these discussions include McPeck (e.g., 1981, 1990), Paul (e.g., 1992) and Siegel (e.g., 1988, 1997) (for more recent contributions to the debate see Norris, 1992; Portelli and Bailin, 1993; Walters, 1994; Thayer-Bacon, 2000; see also Haroutunian-Gordon, 1998).

Although more traditional questions about the nature and scope of critical thinking continue to surface, one issue that has become increasingly central in recent years is the question as to whether the idea(l) of critical thinking is a neutral, objective, universal and self-evident idea(l), or whether it is in some way *biased* (e.g., by culture, class or gender). Although the bias-question is part of the more general question concerning the *justification* and *justifiability* of the idea(l) of critical thinking,[2] it is special in that it has not so much emerged from the internal development of the debate about critical thinking but mainly from the ways in which the idea(l) of critical thinking has been challenged from the "outside." Postmodernist, feminists and (neo-)pragmatists are among those who have questioned the neutral, self-evident character of the idea(l) of critical thinking (see, e.g., Orr, 1989; Garrison and Phelan, 1990; Thayer-Bacon, 1992, 1993; Alston, 1995; Garrison, 1999). They have not done this, so it must be stressed, in order to reject the idea(l), but rather to come to a more encompassing articulation – a "redescription" (Thayer-Bacon, 1998) – of it.

Any answer to the question whether or not the idea(l) of critical thinking is biased, is intimately connected with the way in which we conceive of the idea of critique itself. It is intimately connected, in other words, with our conception of "criticality" (see for this term Burbules, 1999). In this paper we want to contribute to the ongoing discussion about critical thinking by focusing on the more general

and in a sense also more fundamental issue of the status of critique. We will discuss three different conceptions of "criticality," to which we will refer as *critical dogmatism*, *transcendental critique*, and *deconstruction*. These conceptions, so we will argue, not only differ in their understanding of what it is to be critical – which means that they entail different definitions of the critical "operation". They also rest upon different justifications for "being critical." They provide, in other words, different answers to the question as to what gives each of them the *right* to be critical.

The argument that we will pursue in the following pages consists of the following steps. The first conception of criticality that we discuss (critical dogmatism) conceives of critique as the application of a criterion. The main problem with this position concerns the justification of the criterion. While some argue that the uncritical acceptance of the critical criterion is inevitable, others have argued that it is possible to justify the critical criterion in a non-dogmatic manner. In doing so the latter approach (transcendental critique) not only provides a different answer to the question of the justification of the critical criterion. It also entails a different "style" of critique. While this conception of criticality provides a less uncritical and hence more consistent approach to the question of critique, it is still problematic in that it entails a totalizing style of critique. The third conception of criticality that we present (deconstruction) can be seen as an attempt to articulate a non-totalizing conception of critique.

The main aim of this paper is to provide some philosophical "groundwork" for the discussion about the idea(l) of critical thinking, more specifically with respect to the question as to whether this ideal is biased. We will show that "critique" is not a univocal and monolithic notion, but that different conceptions of criticality can be distinguished. Our main assumption is that if we want to take the critical vocation of philosophy seriously, we must continuously be vigilant for uncritical "remainders" in any conception of criticality. Our main claim is that in precisely this respect deconstruction provides the most consistent approach available.

Critical Dogmatism[3]

The first way in which we can conceive of what it is to be critical, is to think of critique as the application of a criterion in order to evaluate a specific state of affairs. We propose to refer to this style of critique as *critical dogmatism*. The operation can be called *critical* in that it gives an evaluation of a specific state of affairs. Yet the operation is *dogmatic* in that the criterion itself is kept out of reach of the critical operation. Critical dogmatism, so we could say, derives its right to be critical from the *truth* of the criterion (cf. Masschelein and Wimmer, 1996, chapter 1).

In education we can find many examples of this style of critique. Critical work is, e.g., carried out by means of a definition of what counts as education (see, e.g., Peters, 1966). Such a definition can then be used to evaluate educative practices and

theories which can then turn out be, e.g., non-educative or indoctrinary. A further example can be found in the work of those educators who take "emancipation" as the general criterion for the evaluation of educational theory and practice, as is the case in critical pedagogy (see, e.g., Mollenhauer, 1973; McLaren, 1995).

Although we refer to this style of critique as dogmatic, there is as such nothing objectionable to this approach. That is to say, there is nothing objectionable *as long as one recognizes and accepts its dogmatic character.* In his *Treatise on Critical Reason* (Albert, 1985) Hans Albert has even suggested that critical dogmatism is inevitable. He argues, in what has become know as the *Münchhausen trilemma*, that any attempt to articulate foundations – and in critical dogmatism the criterion is the foundation of the critical operation – inevitably leads to a trilemma, i.e., "a situation with three alternatives, all of which appear unacceptable" (Albert, 1985, p. 18). According to Albert we are forced to choose between (1) an *infinite regress*, because the propositions that serve as a fundament need to be founded themselves; (2) a *logical circle* that results from the fact that in the process of giving reasons one has to resort to statements that have already shown themselves to be in need of justification; or (3) breaking off the attempt at a particular point by *dogmatically* installing a foundation. Since neither the first nor the second option appear to lead to any satisfactory results in finding and founding a criterion, the conclusion has to be that the only possible foundation for critique *is* a dogmatic foundation, so that the only possible form of critique *is* critical dogmatism.

While there are reasons to conceive of critique as criterion-based evaluation, it is not difficult to see that there is at least a tension, presumably a paradox, and possibly even a contradiction at stake in this conception of criticality. All depends, of course, on whether one accepts Albert's conclusion and, not unimportantly, on whether one recognizes that a specific criterion for critique indeed only has a conventional basis. With respect to the latter point, it has been argued most strongly by postmodern thinkers that the foundations that play a central role in modern philosophy – such as: the subject, consciousness, reality or truth – are not as solid and self-evident as has for a long time been assumed (see, e.g., Biesta, 1995).

Although we do not want to suggest that the application of certain criteria has never had any positive effects or that all critical work in education along this line has been in vain, we do want to argue that the justification that critical dogmatism provides for being critical is unsatisfactory. Is it possible to circumvent the paradox of critical dogmatism? According to the style of critique that we will discuss next, this is indeed possible.

Transcendental Critique

Like critical dogmatism transcendental critique conceives of the critical operation as the application of a criterion. The main difference between the two critical styles lies in the way in which this criterion is justified, viz., by means of a transcendental form of argumentation.

The transcendental style of critique must be understood against the background of the way in which philosophy had to reconsider its position as a result of the emergence of the scientific worldview. From then onwards philosophy could no longer claim to provide knowledge of the natural world, nor could it claim to provide knowledge of a more fundamental reality (meta-physics). As a result it lost its role as a foundational discipline. It was Kant who put philosophy on a new track – the *transcendental* track – where it became the proper task of philosophy to articulate the *conditions of possibility* of true (scientific) knowledge (and, within the Kantian project, also of true metaphysical knowledge, i.e., knowledge of the synthetic judgements a priori; see Kant, 1956).

Although transcendental philosophy opened up a whole new field for modern philosophy, Kant's program was almost immediately criticized for the reflexive paradox it contained. It was Hegel who exposed the problematic character of the attempt to acquire knowledge of something of which the existence had already to be presupposed (viz., the capacity to acquire knowledge) in order to be able to acquire any knowledge at all.[4] The main reasons why Kant did not perceive the paradox followed from the framework in which he operated, which was the framework of the philosophy of consciousness. For Kant, the "Ich denke" (I think), the "transcendental apperception" was "that highest point to which we must ascribe all employment of the understanding, even the whole of logic, and conformally therewith, transcendental philosophy" (Kant, 1929, B134).

KARL-OTTO APEL'S TRANSFORMATION OF PHILOSOPHY

The work of Karl-Otto Apel can be seen as a rearticulation (or transformation; see Apel, 1980, p. 973) of transcendental philosophy which tries to circumvent the dogmatic element in Kant's position by making a shift from the framework of the philosophy of consciousness to the philosophy of language. The main difference between Kant and Apel lies in the latter's recognition of the fact that all knowledge is linguistically mediated. While Kant assumed that the acquisition of knowledge is an individualistic enterprise, Apel argues that our individual experiences must be lifted to the level of a language game in order to become knowledge. The link between experience and language is, however, not automatically established. The question of the validity of our individual experiences has to be answered by means of *argumentation*. Because argumentation only makes sense within a language game, within a specific "community of communication," Apel concludes that this community is the condition of possibility of all knowledge.

Apel's "linguistic turn" thus results in the recognition of the *a priori* of the community of communication. For Apel this community is "das Letzte, Nichthintergehbare," i.e., that what cannot be surpassed (Apel quoted in Van Woudenberg, 1991, p. 92). Because we can never get "behind" or "before" the actual use of language in a specific community of communication, any reflection on language in formal terms can only take place in and hence is only made possible by a specific

language game, i.e., in a specific community of communication. The pragmatic dimension of language is therefore the most basic dimension, for which reason Apel refers to his position as *transcendental pragmatics*.

Although Apel establishes a strong link between transcendental pragmatics and really existing communities of communication – a maneuver, which seems to give his project a strongly conventionalistic basis – he introduces a critical element which is meant to enable him to go beyond mere convention. This is the idea of the *ideal community of communication* or the *transcendental language game*. Apel claims that a participant in a genuine argument is at the same time a member of an actual community of communication *and* of a counterfactual *ideal* community of communication, a community that is in principle open to all speakers and that excludes all force except the force of the better argument. Apel argues that any claim to intersubjectively valid knowledge implicitly acknowledges this ideal community of communication, as a meta-institution of rational argumentation, to be its ultimate source of justification (Apel, 1980, p. 119).

Reflexive grounding

The idea of the ideal community of communication thus provides a criterion which makes critique possible. What distinguishes Apel's position from critical dogmatism is, that this criterion is *not* installed dogmatically but by means of a process to which Apel refers as *reflexive grounding* ("Letztbegründung durch Reflexion"). With respect to this process Apel claims that he can circumvent the dogmatic implications of the Münchhausen trilemma. How should this be understood?

The first thing to acknowledge is that the first and third option of the Münchausen trilemma – infinite regress and dogmatism – hang together. Both follow from the fact that Albert thinks of the process of foundation in terms of *deduction*. It is evident that if we talk about foundations in a deductive style, i.e., if we raise the question of the "foundation of the foundation," we immediately enter an infinite regress, which can only be stopped arbitrarily. Apel admits that if we understand founding in this deductive sense, we will never find foundations. But, so he argues, this does not mean that we should give up the idea of foundation as such, but only that we need another way to bring foundations into view.[5]

Apel's approach starts from the recognition that the conditions of possibility of argumentation have to be presupposed in all argumentation (otherwise they would not be conditions of possibility). From this it follows that one cannot argue against these conditions without immediately falling into a *performative contradiction*. This is the situation where the performative dimensions of the argument, i.e., the act of arguing, contradicts the propositional content, i.e., what is argued (like in sentences as "I claim that I do not exist," or "I contend – thereby claiming truth – that I make no truth claim"). This implies *that all contentions that cannot be disclaimed without falling into a performative contradiction, express a condition of*

possibility of the argumentative use of language. The principle of the avoidance of the performative contradiction, in short the principle of *performative consistency*, thus is the criterion which can reveal the ultimate foundations of the argumentative use of language, i.e., those propositions that do not need further grounding because they cannot be understood without knowing that they are true.[6]

Although Apel articulates the method and the criterion by which the ultimate foundations of the argumentative use of language can be revealed, he doesn't say much about what these foundations actually are (cf. Van Woudenberg, 1991, pp. 134–135). Yet what the application of the principle of performative consistency can bring into view are precisely the foundations, or, as Apel calls them, the "meta-rules" of all argumentative use of language. These meta-rules, which include such things as that all communication aims at consensus, that all communication rest upon the validity of claims to truth, rightness and truthfulness, and that these claims can in principle be redeemed, outline the *ideal* community of communication (see Van Woudenberg, 1991, pp. 134–135).

TRANSCENDENTAL CRITIQUE

Apel's transcendental pragmatics provides an attempt to articulate the criteria for critique in a non-dogmatic way. The importance of Apel's position lies in the fact that goes beyond the individualism of Kantian transcendental philosophy. Apel brings the transcendental approach into the realm of argumentation and communication.[7] More than simply another conception of critique, Apel's position suggests that critical dogmatism – at least in so far as it concerns the dogmatic, or what Popper calls the irrational choice for a rational form of life – is an untenable position, because "any choice that could be understood as meaningful already presupposes the transcendental language game as its condition of possibility" (Apel, 1987a, p. 281). Only, therefore, "under the rational presupposition of intersubjective rules can deciding in the presence of alternatives be understood as meaningful behavior" (ibid.).

From this, so Apel concludes, is does not follow that every decision is rational, but only, that *a decision in favor of the principle of rational legitimation of criticism* is "rational a priori" (ibid., p. 282). Reason, so Apel argues, in no way needs to replace its rational justification, for "it can always confirm its own legitimation through reflection on the fact that it presupposes its own self-understanding of the very rules it opts for" (ibid.).

These remarks reveal that for Apel the criticality of transcendental critique is motivated by the principle of rationality. After all, so we could say, the "sin" of the performative contradiction is a sin against rationality. In this respect rationality gives transcendental critique its "right" to be critical. Transcendental critique suggests a style of critical thinking that is primarily aimed at spotting performative contradictions. It can therefore be understood as a specific form of internal critique, where the main critical work consists of the confrontation of a position or argument

with its often implicit conditions of possibility in order to reveal whether such a position or argument is rational or not.[8]

The main advantage of the transcendental style of critique lies in the fact that it brings into vision a critical program that does not rest upon an arbitrary, dogmatic choice for criteria. In doing so transcendental critique outlines a stronger and more consistent critical program than critical dogmatism. It will be clear, however, that the strength of transcendental critique rests upon the validity of the transcendental style of argumentation. It is at this point that the third conception of criticality that we want to discuss raises some important issues.

Deconstruction

The writings of Jacques Derrida, to which we will refer as the philosophy of *deconstruction*, can be understood as yet another reaction to the Munchausen trilemma. Like Apel, deconstruction rejects the possibility of grounding by deduction. Like Apel, deconstruction seeks a solution along the lines of the second option of the trilemma, i.e., the option of the reflexive paradox. But unlike Apel, deconstruction doesn't try to escape the paradox by means of a transcendental movement. It rather chooses to stay within this paradoxical terrain in order to explore its critical potential. In doing so it not only offers yet another way to think about critique and criticality. It also provides a profound critique of the transcendental approach in that it questions the very possibility to articulate condition of possibility in an unambiguous way. In this respect, so we will argue, deconstruction moves the discussion about conception of criticality one step "forwards."

Deconstruction and the metaphysics of presence

Derrida sees the history of Western philosophy is a continuous attempt to locate a fundamental ground, an Archimedean point which serves both as an absolute beginning and as a center from which everything originating from it can be mastered and controlled (see Derrida, 1978). Since Plato this origin has always been defined in terms of *presence*. The origin is thought of as fully present to itself and as totally self-sufficient. The "determination of Being as *presence*," Derrida holds, is the matrix of the history of metaphysics. This "metaphysics of presence" (Derrida, 1978, p. 281) includes a *hierarchical axiology* in which the origin is designated as pure, simple, normal, standard, self-sufficient and self-identical, in order *then* to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident etcetera. This, so Derrida argues, is "*the* metaphysical exigency," that which has been "the most constant, most profound and most potent" (Derrida, 1988, p. 93).

Derrida wants to put the metaphysical gesture into question. He acknowledges that he is not the first to do so. But unlike Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger and all the other "destructive discourses," Derrida argues that we can never make a total break, that we can never step outside of the tradition that has made us. "There is no

sense," he argues, "in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We (. . .) can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest" (Derrida, 1978, p. 280). While Derrida definitely wants to shake metaphysics, he acknowledges that this cannot be done from some neutral and innocent place outside of metaphysics.[9] What is more to the point, to put it simply, is to say that Derrida wants to shake metaphysics by showing that it is itself always already "shaking," by showing, in other words, the impossibility of any of its attempts to fix or immobilize being through the presentation of a self-sufficient presence.

Deconstruction is therefore not something that is applied to the (texts of the) metaphysical tradition from the outside. Derrida stresses that deconstruction is not a method "and cannot be transformed into one" (Derrida, 1991, p. 273). Deconstruction rather is "one of the possible names to designate (. . .) what occurs [*ce qui arrive*], or cannot manage to occur [*ce qui n'arrive pas à arriver*], namely a certain dislocation which in effect reiterates itself regularly – and everywhere where there is something rather than nothing" (Derrida and Ewald, 1995, pp. 287–288).

DIFFÉRANCE AND DECONSTRUCTION

One way in which Derrida articulates the occurance of deconstruction is through the "notion" of *différance*. Derrida develops his ideas about *différance* in the context of a discussion of the structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure (see Derrida, 1982, pp. 1–28). Saussure had argued that language should not be understood as a naming process, a process of attaching words to things, but that it should rather be seen as a structure where any individual element is meaningless outside the confines of that structure. Language, so we could say, only consists of differences. These differences, however, are not differences between positive terms, i.e., between terms that in and by themselves refer to objects outside of the system. In language there are only differences *without* positive terms. From this insight – which we can here describe only briefly – two conclusions follow.

First of all, the idea of differences without positive terms entails, that the "movement of signification" is only possible if each element "appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself" (Derrida, 1982, p. 13). What is called "the present" is therefore constituted "by means of this very relation to what it is not" (ibid.) This contamination is a necessary contamination: for the present to be itself, it already has to be *other* than itself. This puts the non-present in a double position, because it is the non-present which makes the presence of the present possible, and yet, it can only make this presence possible by means of its own exclusion. What is excluded thereby, in a sense, returns to sign the act of its own exclusion. And it is this apparent complicity, which "outplays the legality of the decision to exclude" in the first place (Bennington, 1993, pp. 217–218; see also Derrida, 1981, pp. 41–42).

If this is what deconstruction can bring into view, we can already get an idea of its critical potential, because at the heart of deconstruction we find a concern for the "constitutive outside" of what presents itself as self-sufficient. This reveals that deconstruction is more than just a destruction of the metaphysics of presence. Deconstruction is first and foremost an *affirmation* of what is excluded and forgotten. An affirmation, in short, of what is *other* (cf. Gasché, 1994).[10]

DECONSTRUCTION IS JUSTICE

There is, however, a complication, which concerns the question *how* deconstruction can bring that what is excluded into view. For if it is the case that in language there are only differences without positive terms, then we have to concede that we can no longer articulate the differential character of language itself by means of a positive term (like "differentiation"). Difference without positive terms implies that this dimension must itself always remain unperceived, for strictly speaking, it is unconceptualizable. Derrida thus concludes that the "play of difference," which is "the condition for the possibility and functioning of every sign, is in itself a silent play" (Derrida, 1982, p. 5).

If we would want to articulate that which does not let itself be articulated and yet is the condition for the possibility of all articulation – which we may want to do in order to prevent metaphysics from re-entering – we must acknowledge that there can never be a word or a concept to represent this silent play. We must acknowledge that this play cannot simply be exposed, for "one can expose only that which at a certain moment can become *present*" (ibid.). And we must acknowledge that there is nowhere to begin, "for what is put into question is precisely the quest for a rightful beginning, an absolute point of departure" (ibid., p. 6). All this is expressed in the new word or concept – "which is neither a word nor a concept" (ibid., p. 7) but a "neographism" (ibid., p. 13) – of *différance*.

The reason why Derrida introduces that "what is written as *différance*" (ibid., p. 11) is not difficult to grasp. For although the play of difference is identified as the condition for the possibility of all conceptuality, we should not make the mistake to think that we have finally identified the real origin of conceptuality.[11] The predicament can be put as follows: because we are talking about the condition of possibility of all conceptuality, this condition cannot belong to that what it makes possible, i.e., the "order" of conceptuality. Yet the only way in which we can *articulate* this condition of possibility is from within this order. Because the condition of possibility is always articulated in terms of the system that is made possible by it, it is, in a sense, always already too late to be its condition of possibility (which implies that the condition of possibility is at the very same time a condition of impossibility; cf. Gasché, 1986, pp. 316–317).

At this point the critical potential of deconstruction returns in an even more radical way. The idea here is that because conditions of possibility are always already contaminated by the "system" that is made possible by them, this "system"

is never totally delimited by these conditions. *Différance* is therefore a quasi-transcendental or quasi-condition of possibility. As Caputo (1997, p. 102) puts it, *différance*

> does not describe fixed boundaries that delimit what can happen and what not, but points a mute, Buddhist finger at the moon of uncontainable effects.

Deconstruction thus tries to open up the system in the name of that which cannot be thought of in terms of the system (and yet makes the system possible). This reveals that the deconstructive affirmation is not simply an affirmation of what is known to be excluded by the system. Deconstruction is an affirmation of what is wholly other (*tout autre*), of what is unforeseeable from the present. It is an affirmation of an otherness that is always to come, as an event which "as event, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations" (Derrida, 1992, p. 27). Deconstruction is an openness towards the unforeseeable in-coming (*l'invention*; invention) of the other (see Caputo, 1992, p. 47). It is from this concern for what is totally other, a concern to which Derrida sometimes refers as *justice*, that deconstruction derives its right to be critical, its right to deconstruct – or, to be more precise, its right to reveal deconstruction.[12]

FROM CRITIQUE TO DECONSTRUCTION

It is not too difficult to see the profound difference between deconstruction and critical dogmatism. Derrida points out that "the instance of *krinein* or of *krisis* (decision, choice, judgement, discernment) is . . . one of the essential 'themes' or 'objects' of deconstruction" (Derrida, 1991, p. 273), for which reason he even concludes that "deconstruction is deconstruction of critical dogmatism" (Derrida, 1995, p. 54). Derrida tries to show in many different ways that there is no safe ground upon which we can base our decisions, that there are no pure, uncontaminated, original criteria on which we can simply and straightforwardly base our judgements. At the basis of our decisions, as he puts it, lies a radical *undecidability* which cannot be closed off by our decisions, but which "continues to inhabit the decision" (Derrida, 1996, p. 87).

The distance between deconstruction and transcendental critique is perhaps more difficult to grasp. Yet we want to argue that deconstruction, while in a sense staying remarkably close to the main intuitions of transcendental pragmatics, also puts a serious challenge to this program. Apel and Derrida agree on the fact that we are always on the inside of language and history, so that the language game that made us who we are, that gives us to possibility to speak in the first place, is, in Apel's words, "nichthintergehbar" (unsurpassable). This is why Derrida stresses that there cannot be a total rupture from the language game of metaphysics (which comes close to Apel's claim that a total critique of reason is impossible).

Difficulties arise as soon as we want to say something about that which makes our speaking – and more specifically in the case of Apel: argumentation – possible.

Although Apel hesitates to give a positive description of the conditions of possibility of the argumentative use of language, he at least believes that these conditions can be identified in a positive way by means of the principle of performative consistency. This, as we have argued, leads him eventually to the meta-rules that constitute the ideal community of communication.

Derrida is much more radical in his rejection of the possibility to identify and articulate the conditions of possibility of our speaking in any positive and unambiguous way. This is the whole point of *différance*, which is nothing less than an attempt to express the inexpressible, to point out the predicament that a condition of possibility has to be "outside" of the system that is made possible by it in order to be a condition of possibility, and yet at the very same time can only be articulated from the "inside" of the system that it has made possible. *Différance* is, therefore, at the very same time inside and outside, it is both origin and effect, for which reason it can only be understood as a "quasi-condition of possibility" that, as we have seen, does not describe fixed boundaries that delimit what can happen and what not.

The crucial difference between transcendental critique and deconstruction, so we want to argue, lies precisely here. If we see it correctly, Apel has to assume that the conditions of possibility control the system that is made possible by them. It is only on the basis of this assumption that a performative contradiction can arise, because such a contradiction can only occur when all possible performances in the system are controlled by these conditions. What Derrida brings to the fore, is that conditions of possibility can never be articulated independent of the system, that they can never be articulated from some safe metaphysical position outside of the system. And it is precisely because of this that they cannot have total control over the system. What is possible, so we could say, is always more than what any conditions of possibility allow for. Deconstruction wants to do justice to this unforeseeable excess.

In this respect deconstruction can be seen as offering yet another conception of criticality (although it should by now be clear that after deconstruction both the idea of a conception and the idea of criticality have to be understood differently, just as the "after" of after deconstruction is not simply an after) in that it envisages another way to go beyond the present and the given, another way, in short, for judgement to become possible. Unlike critical dogmatism this judgement doesn't come from some allegedly safe place outside. Unlike transcendental critique, it doesn't come from the inside – as a form of internal critique through a test of performative consistency – either. Deconstruction suggests that *both* resources of critique are not as pure and self-sufficient as is assumed. The critical work of deconstruction, so we could say, consists in revealing the impurity of the critical criteria, it consists in revealing that they are not self-sufficient but need something other than themselves to be(come) possible. *Not*, as is so often claimed about deconstruction in particular and postmodern and poststructural thought more generally (see for a recent example Hill et al., 1999), to subvert the very possibility of critique, but rather to

open up critique for its own uncritical assumptions – albeit *not* from some higher position or higher form of insight or knowledge (see also Biesta, 1998). Not, in other words, to destroy but rather to *affirm* what is excluded and forgotten, to open up the possibility for the unforeseeable.

Conclusion

In the foregoing pages we have shown that "critique" is not a monolithic concept, but that there are several ways to understand and articulate what "being critical" is. We have also shown that different conceptions of criticality rest upon different justifications of the critical "operation." These, in turn relate to different answers to the question as to what gives each position the right to be critical, to which we have referred as truth, rationality, and justice respectively. We have argued that critical dogmatism is problematic to the extent that it rests upon a *dogmatic* installment of the critical criterion, although we have shown that it is possible to argue that dogmatism is inevitable. We want to stress once more that critical dogmatism is more prevalent than is often assumed – although here everything depends on whether one is willing to concede that there is a dogmatic element involved in once critical stance (see on this also Biesta, 1998). The transcendental style of critique provides in a sense a more consistent conception of criticality. We have suggested, however, that it remains problematic in that it assumes that it can bring the foundations of critique into vision (albeit by a more sophisticated line of argumentation, viz., the transcendental line). In this respect, so we want to argue, transcendental critique displays a totalizing tendency. Deconstruction – "if such a thing exists" – tries to go beyond this tendency in that it tries to open up, neither in order to install a new totality, nor by means of an other, new totality.

While the foregoing pages may provide some new insights for the ongoing discussions about critical thinking, it will be clear that this is only a first step and that many issues still need to be addressed. This, however, lies well beyond the scope of our current contribution in which we mainly have tried to "open up" our understanding of critique and criticality. If, against this background, we return briefly to the question as to whether the idea(l) of critical thinking is biased, we can first of all conclude that critical dogmatism is without doubt a biased position. It may, however, be more appropriate to think of it as an *interested* position. After all, the bias-question has primarily to do with the assumption that the idea(l) of critical thinking is a self-justifying idea(l) – which is a central claim in the work of those who apply a transcendental approach to critical thinking. With respect to this question it appears that transcendental critique and deconstruction take diametrically opposed positions. One way to frame the issue at stake is to ask whether rationality should have priority to justice, or whether justice should have priority to rationality. Siegel, an astute defender of the transcendental approach, is not only acutely aware of this issue but is also very explicit in outlining his position when he writes that "the philosophical enterprise does not have as its goal the bringing about of social

justice" (Siegel, 1995, p. 22). We want to argue, however, that if rationality is to have any value at all – and we do in no way want to deny that it might be valuable – this value should eventually stem from its contribution in furthering the case of justice (see also Biesta, 1999b). This, in sum, is the direction in which we think that a redescription of critical thinking that takes the lessons from deconstruction into consideration, should go.

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Notes

[1] "Der Mensch ist das einzige Geschöpf, das erzogen werden muss. (…) Der Mensch kann nur Mensch werden durch Erziehung. Er is nichts, als was die Erziehung aus ihm macht" (Kant, 1982, pp. 697, 699).

[2] Siegel is one of the few participants who has dealt with this issue extensively (see e.g., Siegel, 1987, 1988, 1990; cf. Snik and Zevenbergen, 1995, p. 112).

[3] In the next three sections of this paper we make use of an argument that was developed in a slightly different context in Biesta, 1999a.

[4] "Die Forderung ist also diese: man soll das Erkenntnisvermögen erkennen, ehe man erkennt; es ist dasselbe wie mit dem Schwimmenwollen, ehe man ins Wasser geht. Die Untersuchung des Erkenntnisvermögens ist selbts erkennend, kann nicht zu dem kommen, zu was es kommen will, weil es selbst dies ist …" (Hegel, quoted in Sas, 1995, p. 508) Nietzsche would later express this concern quite poignantly in the following way: "(E)ine Kritiek des Erkenntnisvermögens ist unsinnig; wie sollte das Werkzeug sich selbst kritisieren können, wenn es eben nur *sich* zur Kritik gebrauchen kann? Es kann nicht einmal sich selbst definieren" (Nietzsche, 1964, section 486).

[5] In a sense we could say that Apel uses the middle option of the trilemma, the logical circle, to find his way out (cf. Sas, 1995, pp. 506–511).

[6] In Apel's own words: "(dieses) Kriterium … ist in der Lage, unbestreitbare Präsuppositionen der Argumentation als reflexiv-letztbegründete Sätze aufzuzeichnen: d.h., Sätze, die keiner *Begründung aus etwas anderem* bedürfen, weil *man sie nicht verstehen kann, ohne zu wissen dass sie wahr sind*" (Apel, 1987b, p. 185).

[7] Although the transcendental approach plays a central role in the debates about the justification of rationality at the central principle of critical thinking (see, most notably, the work of Harvey Siegel), Apel's approach, which to our understanding provides the most sophisticated version of transcendental philosophy available today, has hardly been explored in the context of these discussions. One of the few exeptions is Zevenbergen (1997).

[8] This line of thought is quite often used to argue that claims by so-called minority groups to have the right to educate their children in group-specific ways cannot be sustained since such claims rest upon non-group-specific principles.

[9] In so far as critique operates through the application of an external criterion, this means that deconstruction is *not* a critique (see Derrida, 1991, p. 273; cf. Norris, 1987, p. 56).

[10] Although we present these ideas in the context of a discussion about language, they have a more larger significance than the field of language alone. See for a brilliant application of these ideas on issues concerning politics and political theory Honig (1993).

[11] Strictly speaking, there is only one way to avoid this mistake, which is by acknowledging that the differences that constitute the play of difference "are themselves *effects*" (Derrida, 1982, p. 11). This means, then, that in the "most classical fashion," that is in the language of metaphysics, we would have to speak of them as effects "without a cause" (ibid., p. 12).

[12] Over the past years a whole body of literature on Derrida's rather idiosyncratic use of the idea of justice has been published. Besides Derrida (1992), we refer the reader to Derrida (1999) and Critchley (1999).

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